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Gaughan right to resist Golisano

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The cliché says to take the money and run. Civic leader Kevin Gaughan looked at Tom Golisano's money — and the baggage that would come with it — and ran the other way.

I don't blame him. For a few reasons, Golisano & Co. are unwelcome passengers on Gaughan's crusade to cut the size of municipal governments in Erie County.

The Rochester billionaire held a news conference Tuesday, announcing his support for Gaughan's movement.

Gaughan's response was, "Thanks, but no thanks." He has declined Golisano's offer to sign on, but Golisano is going ahead, anyway.

The three-time gubernatorial candidate and Buffalo Sabres owner would bring bread to the downsizing table. He also brings the taint of big money and backroom politics to a grass-roots, seat-of-the-pants movement.

The backroom politics comes in the person of political operative and Golisano ally Steve Pigeon. The former county Democratic boss symbolizes, in the minds of many, the political infighting and backstabbing that people are sick of — and that the downsizing movement is supposed to be an antidote to.

A Golisano/Pigeon forced entry into Gaughan's downsizing push would give defenders of the status quo a new argument: The drive to cut oversized town and village boards is the move of a wealthy outsider, aided by a political operative, to change the shape of our county's governments.

"This movement is succeeding on its own merits," Gaughan said. "It does not need Tom Golisano's money or Steve Pigeon's politics. All we need is to let citizens have their say."

Gaughan's 2006 study of the mutant size — 341 elected officials — and annual \$32 million cost of government in this county jump-started the downsizing movement. He pressed the issue by bringing the downsizing call directly

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to 41 town and village boards. Gaughan last week took the fight to the people, starting a petition drive in West Seneca to let voters decide whether to downsize the Town Board. He plans to repeat the move in other towns.

I understand why Golisano wants to glom onto— or worse, try to co-opt— Gaughan’s yearslong initiative. It is easier for Tommy-come-lately to hitch a ride on Gaughan’s train and claim credit for whatever reform it leads to than it is to launch his own campaign.

If Golisano is hellbent on cutting governments, there are hundreds of villages and towns across the state he can take the battle to — some of them in his home county of Monroe. “Quite frankly,” Golisano responded, “I don’t have the time to go from city to city.”

Fine. But then do not horn in on someone who spent two years building a movement.

I have a lot of respect for Golisano, who in self-funded runs for governor put his money where his mouth is. He is supporting State Legislature candidates whom he feels will back reform. But the attempted piggyback onto Gaughan’s initiative looks like a self-serving way for Golisano to polish his political luster.

Gaughan is doing fine without Golisano’s money and the baggage it would bring. Downsizing initiatives in Depew, Lancaster, North Collins, West Seneca and the County Legislature are traceable, all or in part, to Gaughan’s foundation-funded, mostly volunteer effort.

Although he stood with Golisano on Tuesday, West Seneca Supervisor Wally Piotrowski knows whose show this is.


“I can’t stop Golisano and Pigeon from doing what they want,” Piotrowski said, “but everybody knows that [Gaughan] is leading the charge.”

Let’s hope so. The question is not whether Gaughan’s downsizing push can gain from Golisano’s entry. The question is whether it can survive it.

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